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Realizing The Dream! – Give us a student, we give back a Bureaucrat
FREEDOM IN SOCIETY

Bertrand Russell

To what extent is freedom possible, and to what extent is it desirable, among human beings who live in communities? That is the general problem which I wish to discuss.

Perhaps it will be well to begin with definitions. 'Freedom' is a term which is used in many senses, and we must decide upon one of them before we can argue profitably. 'Society' is less ambiguous, but here too some attempt at definition may be not amiss.

I do not think it desirable to use words in fancy senses. For instance, Hegel and his followers think that 'true' freedom consists in the right to obey the police, who are generally called 'the moral law'. The police, of course, must obey their official superiors, but the definition gives us no guidance as to what the Government itself is to do. Accordingly, in practice, the adherents of this view argue that the State is essentially and by definition impeccable. This notion is inappropriate in a country where there is democracy and party Government, since in such a country nearly half the nation believes the Government to be very wicked. We cannot therefore rest content with 'true' freedom as a substitute for freedom.

'Freedom' in its most abstract sense means the absence of external obstacles to the realization of desires. Taken in this abstract sense, freedom may be increased either by maximizing power or by minimizing wants. An insect which lives for a few days and then dies of cold may have perfect freedom according to the definition, since the cold may alter its desires, so that there is no moment when it wishes to achieve the impossible. Among human beings, also, this way of reaching freedom is possible. A young Russian aristocrat, who had become a communist and a Red Army Commissar, explained to me that the English do not, like the Russians, need a physical strait-jacket, because they have a mental one: their souls are always in strait-jackets. Probably there is some truth in this. The people in Dostoevsky are no doubt not quite like real Russians, but at any rate they are people whom only a Russian could have invented. They have all sorts of strange violent desires, from which the average Englishman is free, at least so far as his conscious life is concerned. It is obvious that a community who all wish to murder each other cannot be so free as a community with more peaceable desires. Modification of desire may, therefore, involve just as great a gain to freedom as increase of power.

This consideration illustrates a necessity which is not always satisfied by political thinking: I mean the necessity of what may be called 'psychological dynamics'. It has been far too common to accept human nature as a datum in politics, to which external conditions have to be adapted. The truth is, of course, that external conditions modify human nature, and that harmony between the two is to be sought by a mutual interaction. A man taken from one environment and plunged suddenly into another may be by no means free, and yet the new environment may give freedom to those accustomed to it. We cannot therefore deal with freedom without taking account of the possibility of variable desires owing to changing environment. In some cases this makes the attainment of freedom more difficult, since a new environment, while satisfying old desires may generate new ones which it cannot satisfy. This possibility is illustrated by the psychological effects of industrialism, which generates a host of new wants: a man may be discontented because he cannot afford a motor car, and soon we shall all want private aeroplanes. And a man may be discontented because of unconscious wants. For instance, Americans need rest, but do not know it. I believe this to be a large part of the explanation of the crime wave in the United States.

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Although men's desires vary, there are certain fundamental needs which may be taken as nearly universal: food, drink, health, clothing, housing, sex and parenthood are the chief of these. (Clothing and housing are not absolute necessities in hot climates, but except in the tropics they must be included in the list.) Whatever else may be involved in freedom, certainly no person is free who is deprived of anything in the above list, which constitutes the bare minimum of freedom.

This brings us to the definition of 'society'. It is obvious that the above minimum of freedom can be better secured in a society than by a Robinson Crusoe; indeed, sex and parenthood are essentially social. One may define a 'society' as a group of persons who co-operate for certain common purposes. Where human beings are concerned, the most primitive social group is the family. Economic social groups come quite early; apparently groups which co-operate in war are not quite so primitive. In the modern world, economics and war are the main motives for social cohesion. Almost all of us are better able to satisfy our physical needs than we should be if we had no larger social unit than the family or the tribe, and in that sense society has served to increase freedom. It is thought, also, that an organized State makes us less likely to be killed by our enemies, but this is a doubtful proposition.

If we take a man's desires as a datum, i.e. if we ignore psychological dynamics, it is obvious that the obstacles to his freedom are of two sorts, physical and social. To take the crudest instance: the earth may not yield enough food for his sustenance, or other people may prevent him from obtaining the food. Society diminishes the physical obstacles to freedom, but creates social obstacles. Here, however, we are liable to go wrong through ignoring the effect of society upon desire. One may assume that ants and bees, though they live in well-organized societies, always do spontaneously the things that constitute their social duties. The same is true of most of the individuals among higher animals that are gregarious. According to Rivers, it is true of men in Melanesia. This seems to depend upon a high degree of suggestibility, and upon factors more or less akin to what happens in hypnotism. Men so constituted can co-operate without loss of freedom, and have little need of law. Oddly enough, though civilized men have a far more elaborate social organization than savages have, they appear to be less social in their instincts: the effect of society upon their actions is more external than it is with savages. That is why they discuss the problem of freedom.

I do not, of course, wish to deny that social co-operation has an instinctive basis, even in the most civilized communities. People want to be like their neighbours, and to be liked by them; they imitate, and they catch prevalent moods by suggestion. Nevertheless, these factors seem to diminish in strength as men become more civilized. They are much stronger in schoolboys than in adults, and on the whole they have most power over the least intelligent individuals. More and more, social co-operation is coming to depend upon rational apprehension of its advantages, rather than upon what is loosely termed herd instinct. The problem of individual liberty does not arise among savages, because they feel no need of it, but it arises among civilized men with more and more urgency as they become more civilized. And at the same time the part played by government in the regulation of their lives is continually increasing, as it becomes clearer that government can help to liberate us from the physical obstacles to freedom. The problem of freedom in society is therefore one which is likely to increase in urgency, unless we cease to become more civilized.

It is, of course, obvious that freedom is not to be increased by a mere diminution of government.

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One man's desires are apt to be incompatible with another man's, so that anarchy means freedom for the strong and slavery for the weak. Without government, the human population of the globe could hardly be a tenth of what it is; it would be kept down by starvation and infant mortality. This would be to substitute a physical slavery far more severe than the worst social slavery to be found in civilized communities in normal times. The problem we have to consider is not how to do without government, but how to secure its advantages with the smallest possible interference with freedom. This means striking a balance between physical and social freedom. To put it crudely: how much more governmental pressure should we be prepared to endure in order to have more food or better health?

The answer to this question, in practice, turns upon a very simple consideration: are we to have the food and health, or is someone else? People in a siege, or in England in 1917, have been found willing to endure any degree of governmental pressure, because it was obvious that it was to everyone's advantage. But when one person is to have the governmental pressure and another person is to have the food, the question looks quite different. In this form we arrive at the issue between capitalism and Socialism. Advocates of capitalism are very apt to appeal to the sacred principles of liberty, which are all embodied in one maxim: The fortunate must not be restrained in the exercise of tyranny over the unfortunate.

Laissez-faire Liberalism, which was based upon this maxim, must not be confounded with anarchism. It invoked the law to prevent murder and armed insurrection on the part of the unfortunate; as long as it dared, it opposed trade unionism. But given this minimum of government action, it aimed at accomplishing the rest by economic power. Liberalism considered it proper for an employer to say to an employee: 'You shall die of hunger', but improper for the employee to retort, 'You shall die first, of a bullet'. It is obvious that, apart from legal pedantries, it is ridiculous to make a distinction between these two threats. Each equally infringes the elementary minimum of freedom, but not one more than the other. It was not only in the economic sphere that this inequality existed. The sacred principles of liberty were also invoked to justify the tyranny of husbands over wives and fathers over children; but it must be said that Liberalism tended to mitigate the first of these. The tyranny of fathers over children, in the form of compelling them to work in factories, was mitigated in spite of the Liberals.

But this is a well-worn theme, and I do not wish to linger on it. I want to pass to the general question: How far should the community interfere with the individual, not for the sake of another individual, but for the sake of the community? And for what objects should it interfere? I should say, to begin with, that the claim to the bare minimum of freedom—food, drink, health, housing, clothing, sex and parenthood—should override any other claim. The above minimum is necessary for biological survival, i.e., for the leaving of descendants. The things which I have just enumerated may, therefore, be described as necessities; what goes beyond them may be called comforts or luxuries according to circumstances. Now I should regard it as a priori justifiable to deprive one person of comforts in order to supply another with necessities. It may not be politically expedient, it may not be economically feasible, in a given community at a given moment; but it is not objectionable on the ground of freedom, because to deprive a man of necessities is a greater interference with freedom than to prevent him from accumulating superfluities.

But if this is admitted, it takes us very far. Consider health, for instance. In Borough Council elections one of the questions to be decided is the amount of public money to be spent on such



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matters as public health, maternity care and infant welfare. Statistics prove that what is spent on these objects has a remarkable effect in saving life. In every borough in London, the well-to-do have banded themselves together to prevent an increase, and if possible to secure a diminution, of the expenditure in these directions. That is to say, they are all prepared to condemn thousands of people to death in order that they themselves may continue to enjoy good dinners and motor cars. As they control almost all the Press, they prevent the facts from being known to their victims. By the methods familiar to psycho-analysts, they avoid knowing the facts themselves. There is nothing surprising in their action, which is that of all aristocracies in all ages. All that I am concerned to say is that their action cannot be defended on grounds of freedom.

I do not propose to discuss the right to sex and parenthood. I will merely observe that, in a country where there is a great excess of one sex over the other, existing institutions seem hardly calculated to secure it; and that the tradition of Christian asceticism has had the unfortunate effect of making people less willing to recognize this right than to recognize the right to food. Politicians, who have not time to become acquainted with human nature, are peculiarly ignorant of the desires that move ordinary men and women. Any political party whose leaders knew a little psychology could sweep the country.

While admitting the abstract right of the community to interfere with its members in order to secure the biological necessities to all, I cannot admit its right to interfere in matters where what one man possesses is not obtained at the expense of another. I am thinking of such things as opinion and knowledge and art. The fact that the majority of a community dislikes an opinion gives it no right to interfere with those who hold it. And the fact that the majority of a community wishes not to know certain facts gives it no right to imprison those who wish to know them. I know a lady who wrote a long book giving an account of family life in Texas, which I consider sociologically very valuable. The British police hold that no one must know the truth about anything; therefore it is illegal to send this book through the post. Everybody knows that the patients of psychoanalysts are often cured by the mere process of making them become aware of facts of which they had repressed the recollection. Society is, in certain respects, like these patients, but instead of allowing itself to be cured it imprisons the doctors who bring unwelcome facts to its notice. This is a wholly undesirable form of interference with freedom. The same argument applies to interferences with personal morals: if a man chooses to have two wives or a woman two husbands, it is his affair and theirs, and no one else ought to feel called upon to take action about it.

So far, I have been considering purely abstract arguments as to the limitations of justifiable interferences with freedom. I come now to certain more psychological considerations.

The obstacles to freedom, as we saw, are of two sorts, social and physical. Given a social and a physical obstacle which cause the same direct loss of liberty, the social obstacle is more harmful, because it causes resentment. If a boy wants to climb a tree and you forbid him, he will be furious; if he finds that he cannot climb it, he will acquiesce in the physical impossibility. To prevent resentment, it may often be desirable to permit things which are in themselves harmful, such as going to church during an epidemic. To prevent resentment, governments attribute misfortunes to natural causes; to create resentment, oppositions attribute them to human causes. When the price of bread goes up, governments say it is due to bad harvests, and oppositions say it is due to profiteers. Under the influence of industrialism, people have come to

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believe more and more in the omnipotence of man; they think there is no limit to what human beings can do to obviate natural misfortunes. Socialism is a form of this belief: we no longer regard poverty as sent by God, but as a result of human folly and cruelty. This has naturally altered the attitude of the proletariat towards its 'betters'. Sometimes the belief in human omnipotence is carried too far. Many socialists, including the late Health Minister, apparently think that under Socialism there would be plenty of food for everybody even if the population multiplied until there was only standing room on the earth's surface. This, I am afraid, is an exaggeration. However this may be, the modern belief in the omnipotence of man has increased the resentment when things go wrong, because misfortunes are no longer attributed to God or Nature, even when they justly might be. This makes modern communities harder to govern than the communities of the past, and accounts for the fact that the governing classes tend to be exceptionally religious, because they wish to regard the misfortunes of their victims as due to the will of God. It makes interferences with the minimum of freedom harder to justify than in former times, because they cannot be camouflaged as immutable laws, although every day in the times there are letters from clergymen trying to revive this ancient device.

In addition to the fact that interferences with social freedom are resented, there are two other reasons which tend to make them undesirable. The first is that people do not desire the welfare of others, and the second is that they do not know in what it consists. Perhaps, at bottom, these are one and the same, for when we genuinely desire the good of some person, we usually succeed in finding out what his needs are. At any rate, the practical results are the same whether people do harm from malevolence or from ignorance. We may therefore take the two together, and say that hardly any man or class can be trusted as the trustee of another's interests. This is, of course, the basis of the argument for democracy. But democracy, in a modern State, has to work through officials, and thus becomes indirect and remote where the individual is concerned. There is a special danger in officials, owing to the fact that they usually sit in offices remote from the people whose lives they control. Take education as a case in point. Teachers, on the whole, from contact with children, have come to understand them and care for them, but they are controlled by officials without practical experience, to whom children may be merely nasty little brats. Therefore the interferences of officials with freedom for teachers are generally harmful. So in everything: power lies with those who control finance, not with those who know the matter upon which the money is to be spent. Thus the holders of power are, in general, ignorant and malevolent, and the less they exercise their power the better. The case for compulsion is strongest where the person compelled gives a moral assent to the compulsion, although, if he could, he would neglect what he recognizes to be his duty. We would all rather pay rates than have no roads, though if, by a miracle, the rate-collector overlooked us, most of us would not remind him of our existence. And we readily acquiesce in such measures as the prohibition of cocaine, though alcohol is a more dubious proposition. But the best case is that of children. Children must be under authority, and are themselves aware that they must be, although they like to play a game of rebellion at times. The case of children is unique in the fact that those who have authority over them are sometimes fond of them. Where this is the case, the children do not resent the authority. In general, even when they resist it on particular occasions. Education authorities, as opposed to teachers, have not this merit, and do in fact sacrifice the children to what they consider the good of the State by teaching them 'patriotism', i.e., a willingness to kill and be killed for trivial reasons. Authority would be comparatively

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harmless if it were always in the hands of people who wish well to those whom they control, but there is no known method of securing this result.

Compulsion is at its worst when the victim firmly believes the Act commanded to be wicked or harmful. It would be abominable, even if it were possible, to compel a Mahometan to eat pork or a Hindu to eat beef. Anti-vaccinationists ought not to be compelled to be vaccinated. Whether their infant children should be is another question: I should say not, but the question is not one of freedom, since the child is not consulted in either case. The question is one between the parent and the State, and cannot be decided on any general principle. The parent who has conscientious objections to education is not allowed to keep his child uninstructed; yet, so far as general principles go, the two cases are exactly analogous.

The most important distinction, in this matter of freedom, is between those goods which one man holds at the expense of another, and those in which one man's gain is not another's loss. If I absorb more than my fair share of food, some other man goes hungry; if I absorb an unusually large amount of mathematics, I do no one any harm, unless I have monopolised educational opportunities. There is another point: such things as food, houses and clothes are necessities of life, about the need of which there is not much controversy or much difference between one man and another. Therefore they are suitable for governmental action in a democracy. In all such matters justice should be the governing principle. In a modern democratic community, justice means equality. But it would not mean equality in a community where there was a hierarchy of classes, recognized and accepted by inferiors as well as superiors. Even in modern England, a large majority of wage-earners would be shocked if it were suggested that the King should have no more pomp than they have. I should therefore define justice as the arrangement of producing the least envy. This would mean equality in a community free from superstition, but not in one which firmly believed in social inequality.

But in opinion, thought, art, etc., one man's possessions are not obtained at the expense of another's. Moreover, it is doubtful what is good in this sphere. If Dives is having a feast while Lazarus is eating a crust of bread, Dives will be thought a hypocrite if he preaches the advantages of poverty. But if I like mathematics and another man likes music, we do not interfere with each other, and when we praise each other's pursuits we are merely being polite. And in matters of opinion, free competition is the only way of arriving at truth. The old Liberal watchwords were applied in the wrong sphere, that of economics; it is in the mental sphere that they really apply. We want free competition in ideas, not in business. The difficulty is that, as free competition in business dies out, the victors more and more seek to use their economic power in the mental and moral sphere, and to insist upon right living and right thinking as a condition of being allowed to earn a living. This is unfortunate, since 'right living' means hypocrisy and 'right thinking' means stupidity. There is the gravest danger that, whether under plutocracy or under Socialism, all mental and moral progress will be rendered impossible by economic persecution. The liberty of the individual should be respected where his actions do not directly, obviously and indubitably do harm to other people. Otherwise our persecuting instincts will produce a stereotyped society, as in sixteenth-century Spain. The danger is real and pressing. America is in the van, but we in England are almost sure to follow suit, unless we can learn to value freedom in its proper sphere. The freedom we should seek is not the right to oppress others, but the right to live as we choose and think as we choose where our doing so does not prevent others from doing likewise.



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Finally, I want to say a word about what, at the beginning, I called 'psychological dynamics'. A society where one type of character is common can have more freedom than one in which a different type prevails. A society composed of human beings and tigers could not have much freedom: either the tigers or the human beings must be enslaved. There cannot therefore be any freedom in parts of the world where white men govern coloured populations. To secure the maximum of freedom, it is necessary to form character by education, so that men may find their happiness in activities which are not oppressive. This is a matter of formation of character during the first six years of life. Miss McMillan at Deptford is training children who become capable of creating a free community. If her methods were applied to all children, rich and poor, one generation would suffice to solve our social problems. But emphasis on instruction has made all parties blind to what is important in education. In later years, desires can only be controlled, not fundamentally altered; therefore it is in early childhood that the lesson of live-and-let-live must be taught. Given men and woman who do not desire the things which can only be secured through the misfortunes of others, the obstacles to social freedom will be at an end.

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